

# DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

FREDERIC H. DOUGLAS, CURATOR



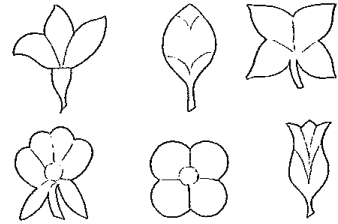
1-Moccock  
Positive design.



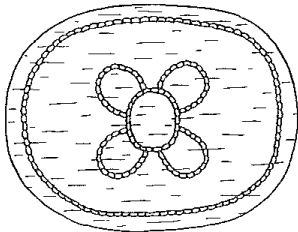
2-Moccock  
Negative design.



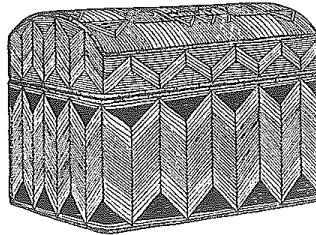
3-Waste basket  
Appliqué design.



4-Cut-out patterns



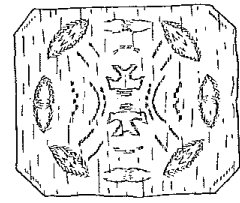
5-Box lid  
Spruce root embroidery.



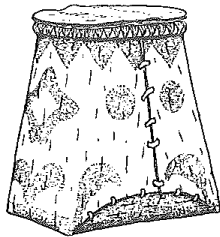
6-Box  
Quill embroidery.



7-Needle case  
Moose hair embroidery.

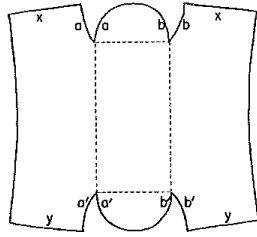


8-Bitten pattern.

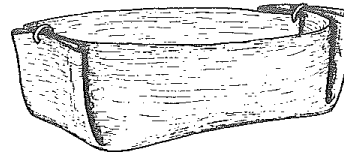


a.

9-Moccock and pattern.

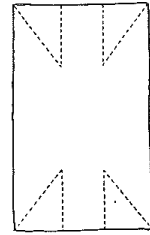


b.



a.

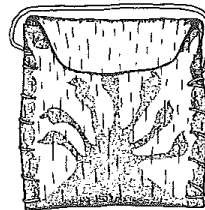
10-Bark cooking tray and pattern.



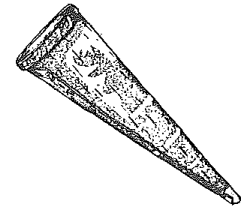
b.



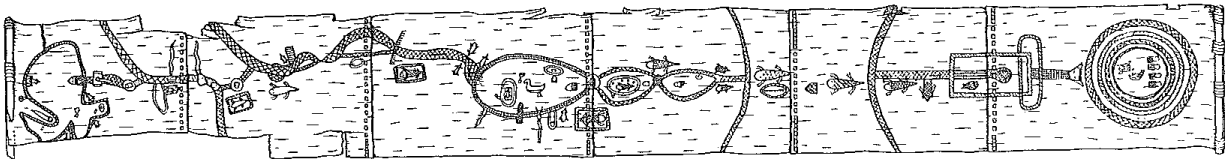
11-Canoe.



12-Envelope.



13-Moose caller.



14-Midé roll.

9b—Museum of the American Indian, Indian Notes and Monographs 11:2. 10a, b; 12—Bureau of American Ethnology, Anthropological Papers No. 17. 11—Canadian Field-Naturalist No. 33.

## Birchbark and the Indian

LEAFLET 102

DECEMBER, 1941

1. **INTRODUCTORY.** Birchbark, a natural product of the northern forest zone, is one of the cornerstones of Indian life in that zone. It is as important to the material economy of these people as buffalo hide was to the Plains tribes or cedar wood and bark to the Northwest Coast peoples. This leaflet is an outline of the birchbark industry and the way the material fits into the life of the people who use it. Fuller details will be presented in future numbers of this series.

2. **THE BIRCH TREE** which provides the bark used by the Indians is the paper or canoe birch, *Betula papyrifera*, one of a number of species of the genus *Betula*, a tree which grows in many parts of the northern hemisphere. The paper birch is found in North America from Alaska to Newfoundland as far north as latitude 70 and as far south as a line running from northern Pennsylvania diagonally north and west across the northern tier of states. Birchbark is used only by tribes which live within its range and NOT by ALL Indians as is sometimes supposed. Not even all Indians within the range of the tree use the bark.

3. **GATHERING THE BARK.** Birchbark is made up of a large number of layers varying somewhat in thickness. The outer layer is white and rather rough. The light brown inner layers are extremely thin, and, in the late winter and early spring, the innermost layer is a dark brown coating between the wood and the bark. Since this layer plays an important part in the decoration of birchbark (see section 4) it is preferable to remove bark from the trees during those months when the dark layer is present.

The trees are cut down and laid on trestles or the like for convenience in handling. A cut is made along the top of the log and from it the bark is peeled slowly and carefully from the trunk with chisels or wedges. Among some tribes at least the process is helped along by placing the log over a fire to warm it, or by pouring on water. After it has been peeled off the bark is treated in various ways depending on the need. The rough white outer layer is frequently scraped off, and the thin inner layers may be separated into thicknesses required for making containers, sheets for bitten patterns and so on.

#### METHODS OF DECORATING

4. **SCRAPING.** The most common method of decorating birchbark objects is to scrape away the dark inner layer mentioned in section 3. When making objects which are to be decorated the inside of the bark is on the outside of the object.

Scraping may be employed so as to produce negative or positive designs. To make the first a cut-out pattern (see section 18) is placed on the bark and a line drawn around the edge. The dark layer is scraped away from the *background* surrounding the outlined pattern so that a dark design on a light ground is produced (2). To make the positive patterns the actual design is scraped away to produce a light design on a dark background (1). Scraping as a decorative technic is largely restricted to the tribes of the extreme northeastern United States and the adjoining parts of Canada. Within this area negative patterns are the rule except among the tribes of Maine and New Brunswick and the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes who make positive designs. There are, of course, occasional exceptions.

5. **BARK APPLIQUÉ** (3). By this is meant the sewing to birchbark objects of patterns cut from other pieces of birchbark. This technic is made necessary when bark peeled from the trees in the summer is used. Such bark does not have the dark inner lining and so cannot be decorated by scraping. The appliqué method is most developed by various birchbark using tribes in Saskatchewan. The technic has a limited use among the Ojibwa and among the Ontario and Quebec tribes.

6. **PAINTING** is very little used as a method of decoration. The few painted specimens I have seen are from the Wisconsin Ojibwa and are quite modern. Ordinary commercial paint has been used and the workmanship is quite crude.

**7. SPRUCE ROOT EMBROIDERY** (5) is used to a considerable extent by the Cree of Saskatchewan and occasionally by some of the eastern Canadian groups. The root is used to make very coarse stitched outline patterns. The Tetes de Boule of Quebec create a decorative effect with spruce root by dyeing the root rim bindings of bark dishes with several colors which are organized in simple repeat patterns. On very modern pieces commercial raffia may be used instead of spruce root.

Decoration by spruce root embroidery and by appliqué are related since in the latter method the roots are used to sew on the bark sections. Both types may in turn be related to the technic next described.

**8. PORCUPINE QUILL EMBROIDERY** (6). The Ottawa and Ojibwa of the Great Lakes, the Micmac of New Brunswick, and the Penobscot of Maine decorate—or formerly decorated—birchbark objects with quills. The ends of the quills are bent at right angles and the bent ends passed through holes in the bark. Almost invariably a lining of birchbark covers the bent ends (see cover of Leaflet 103). By placing the quills very close together and by using various dyes mosaic-like decorations are created. Around the Great Lakes such decorations usually take the form of rather realistic plants, birds and the like against a background of bark. The eastern groups favor all-over geometric patterns in which the bark does not show. The objects so decorated by both groups are almost invariably more or less rounded boxes with lids. Wall pockets, model canoes and other shapes are made however.

**9. MOOSEHAIR EMBROIDERY** (7). Long hairs, averaging about 5 inches, from the mane, cheeks and rump of the moose have been used by the Huron of Quebec to embroider birchbark, as well as cloth and skin. The moose hairs take dye well and many colors are used. The hairs have a superficial resemblance to porcupine quills, but may be recognized by their much smaller diameter. The patterns worked in moosehair on birchbark are always floral, with an occasional bird, animal or person. The representations of plants are very realistic. The embroidery shows either groups of more or less parallel hairs, or solid groups of hairs seen endways. To create the latter effect the hairs are pushed through the bark from the inside and the ends cut off close to the outer surface of the bark.

**10. BITTEN PATTERNS** (8) are made by folding very thin sheets of bark and then impressing patterns in them with the canine teeth. This remarkable and curious art must be done largely by instinct since the woman must move the bark between her teeth without any guidance from her eyes or from a pattern. After the biting is completed the bark is unfolded and a symmetrical pattern appears, usually of a simple floral type. Bitten patterns are used as guides for making beadwork designs, and scraped patterns on birchbark. Being extremely thin light shines through them and they are often made for no other purpose than to look at.

**11. BEADING** of birchbark is known to have been done by the Mohegan Indians of Connecticut. Simple isolated designs were made by sewing glass beads to the bark. See reference 11 for illustrations.

**12. DESIGN STYLES** have been pretty well indicated in the preceding sections. To sum up it may be said that all designs, save those made with quills by the Micmac and their neighbors, are of a curvilinear nature and very frequently represent life forms, those of plants being the most common. Living in the dense forest it is only natural that these tribes should turn to the various aspects of nature for the inspiration of their art. Nevertheless, European influence has made itself felt. References 1 and 4 deal with this question at length. The Maine and New Brunswick tribes use their own local "double curve" style, see reference 17.

## USES OF BIRCHBARK

**13. DWELLINGS** were made by covering frames of poles, either conical or domed, with sheets of bark 6 to 8 feet long and 2 to 3 feet wide. The ends of these large sheets were reinforced with strips of wood. When the Indians traveled the sheets could be rolled up and carried along to be put up at each stopping place.

**14. CONTAINERS.** The most common container (1, 2, 9a) is the so-called mocock. It has a square or oblong base and sides sloping up to a rather small round mouth. These are made by cutting a sheet of bark to a pattern (9b), folding it into shape and sewing with spruce root. Like other containers made for liquids the mococks might have pitch smeared over the seams. Containers for dry substances are not so treated. Mococks are used primarily for the storing or carrying of food or water. Some have lids and others have handles like those on pails.

Another common type is illustrated by (10a). It is made by folding a piece of bark into a deep tray and tying the folds in place (10b). It is primarily a cooking vessel. A similar form is made by cutting the bark to a pattern and sewing with root.

Besides these main types there are round boxes with lids made by the Maine Indians, large pail-like shapes, envelope-shaped containers (12), large back-packs, and cradles.

**15. CANOES** (11) were made of birchbark and have come to be the most celebrated of Indian canoe types. They were, of course, not used by all Indians, as book illustrations, calendars and the like frequently indicate. Reference 16 illustrates most of the types.

**16. MEMORY AIDS (MIDÉ ROLLS)** (14). In the Great Lakes region an important religious society called the Midewiwin (mee-day-we-win) conducted elaborate rites which necessitated the recitation of long prayers, speeches and songs. To assist the memories of the performers symbolic drawings were made on rolls of birchbark and were, in a sense, read during the ceremonies. These sets of pictures were as near the Indian north of Mexico came to developing a system of writing. References 3 and 8 illustrate and interpret a number of these rolls.

**17. OTHER OBJECTS** of many kinds were made of birchbark, though space does not permit more than a mention of them here. Among them are trumpet-shaped moose calls (13), cups, comb cases, match, needle and perfume cases, and floats for fish nets. Later numbers in this series will discuss various types of birchbark objects in more detail.

**18. CUTOUT PATTERNS** (4) are used by many groups who work with birchbark. The patterns are various simple forms cut from birchbark and are combined to create larger designs. The worker selects such patterns as she wishes, lays them on the object to be decorated and draws a line around each. Several types are shown on the cover, and references 1 and 4 shown a great many of them.

Compiled by F. H. Douglas from the examination of specimens and from the following references:

**BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY, WASHINGTON**

1. Art processes in birchbark of the River Desert Algonquin; a circumpolar trait—F. G. Speck. Bulletin 128, 1941.
2. Chippewa customs—Frances Densmore. Bulletin 86, 1929.
3. The Midewiwin or "Grand Medicine Society" of the Ojibwa—W. J. Hoffman. 7th Annual Report for 1885-86. 1891.

**MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN, HEYE FOUNDATION, NEW YORK**

4. Montagnais art in birchbark, a circumpolar trait—F. G. Speck, Indian Notes and Monographs, v 11, n 2, 1937.
5. Decorative art of the Tetes de Boule—D. S. Davidson. Indian Notes and Monographs v 10, n 9, 1928.
6. Decorative art on birchbark containers from the Algonquin River du Lievre band—V. M. Petrullo. Indian Notes v 6, pp 225-242, 1929.
7. River Desert Indians of Quebec—F. G. Speck. Indian Notes v 4, pp 240-252, 1927.
8. Bark record of the Bungi Midewiwin society—D. A. Cadzow. Indian Notes v 3, pp 123-134.
9. An Algonkian band at Lac Barriere, Quebec—Frederick Johnson. Indian Notes v 7, pp 27-39, 1930.
10. Mistassini notes—F. G. Speck. Indian Notes v 7, pp 410-457, 1930.
11. Mohegan beadwork on birchbark—F. G. Speck. Indian Notes v 5, pp 295-298, 1928.

**UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS**

12. Penobscot Man—F. G. Speck. 1940.

**UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS**

13. Naskapi; the savage hunters of the Labrador peninsula—F. G. Speck. 1935.

**AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST**

14. Huron moose hair embroidery—F. G. Speck. v 13, n 1, 1911.

**ABBE MUSEUM, BAR HARBOR, MAINE**

15. The handicrafts of the modern Indians of Maine—Fannie H. Eckstorm. Bulletin 3, 1932.

**THE CANADIAN FIELD-NATURALIST**

16. Canadian aboriginal canoes—F. W. Waugh. v 33, n 2, 1919.

**GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF CANADA**

17. The double-curve motive in northeastern Algonkian art—F. G. Speck. Anthropological series no. 1, 1914.

Thanks are due to Dr. Frank G. Speck for assistance in preparing this leaflet.